

Chuck Watson

2007 Breakfast Speaker and Hospice Volunteer

Editor's Note: Chuck Watson was featured in the newsletter a number of months ago. So many readers were moved by his story that he graciously agreed to speak at the annual "Lighting the Path" Breakfast. The room was silent as we listened to this courageous man tell how he is learning to live with his own mortality and how he prays for us to learn to live for the important things in life. He is a truly remarkable man.

During a recent Sunday service at 1st Baptist Church of Kennewick, Pastor Phil Paulson displayed a picture of a grave. The headstone on this grave was a replica of a parking meter. On the face of this "parking meter" were the words, "TIME EXPIRED."

The question presented was, "Would it make a difference if you knew in advance when your time would expire? Would you change your behavior? Your focus? Your priorities?" If you had a choice, would you want to know in advance that your time was about to expire, or would you rather it happened suddenly and not see it coming?

Mary Schwartz, in Tuesday's With Maury, once said, "Everybody knows they're going to die, but nobody believes it." This pretty much described me; that is until the results of a routine physical a few years ago turned my world upside down.

I was diagnosed with an incurable stage of cancer. I suddenly found myself face-to-face with the certainty of my own impending death.

Before this cancer experience I believed if I was to die I'd rather have it happen suddenly—unexpectedly. I've changed my mind. I'd rather know death was coming. You see, this cancer has been a blessing in many ways. The greatest of these has been the gift of time. **It's given me the time to fall in love with my family all over again, time to get my finances in order, time to make amends, time to develop a relationship with God**, which has made the difference, and time to come to terms with death.

Bette Cooper, the Executive Director of The Chaplaincy earlier mentioned that each of us involved with The Chaplaincy has come with our own story. ***I became involved because I was afraid - afraid of dying.***

Previously I had discovered that the best way to control fear was to face it, even to step into it. With this in mind, I began researching death and dying. During this process I was introduced to the concept of Hospice and began to feel an inner urge to volunteer. I attempted to ignore this urge. How could watching someone die not frighten me more? But the urge to become involved wouldn't let go! Eventually, I gave in and became a Hospice volunteer and oh, how grateful I am!

I've had the privilege of providing companionship and support for people during their last days, and in this process they, unexpectedly, have been some of my greatest teachers.

My cancer prognosis seemed to allow a unique "kindred spirit" relationship to quickly develop with some. Not only was I able (hopefully) to provide companionship and support for them, they seemed lifted by the realization of a renewed purpose in helping me.

I wish everyone could experience the power of deep, unguarded, sharing of the soul I've had in these encounters. There is so much courage to be found, fears to be lost, and lessons to be learned.

Through these discussions I've found a tendency to focus on three primary things.

1. What's next? The power of God is very evident here. Those who have faith seem to find a peace where others struggle.

2. Will my family be OK?

Often, permission to let go is needed from the family, along with reassurance that loved ones will be OK, sad, but OK.

3. Was I significant in this life? This is a time of deep personal reflection on how they lived their life. Even those of little or no faith are hit with the importance of relationships. There is pain in unresolved conflicts with loved ones, and a tendency for regret in self-serving life. One of the greatest of these teachers was a former Kennewick dentist, dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. During one of our visits he said, "You know, I regret the times when my priorities were money, building my business, the big house, cars and vacations...I became so caught up in myself and 'success' that I lost my first family. I was selfish." When asked what he felt good about, "The fact that I found God changed everything. With God's grace I found a new family...I feel good about the times I helped people without expecting something in return. That's what it's all about, you know. It's about reaching OUT TO God and other people. I only wish I would have learned this earlier."

I've learned that what's important in this life is not what many of us strive for through power, position, or possessions. It's not about how much you've gained that's important; it's about how much you gave. It's not how well you were served, its how well you served.

My hospice experience has been a Godsend. My original motive was to learn about dying, and in the process, I learned about living. Someone once said, "Success is measured by the lives you've touched along the way." My experience with hospice and these wonderful people has driven this message home. I'm convinced God has blessed me with this entire experience. My responsibility and desire now is to use it to bless others.